

BOOK REVIEWS

Bala on Bharatanatyam

S. Guhan
(ed. and tr.)

The Sruti Foundation, Madras, 1991
23 pages, Rs 6

In the field of classical Indian dance, one person who could etch herself in the memory of those who watched her once was Balasaraswati. Entering the universe of dance at a time when dignity was being rediscovered in a decadent tradition, Bala (as she is affectionately known) reigned supreme for over 50 years. If the dance style of the Tamil region had been merely changed in nomenclature from Dasi-attam to Bharatanatyam (which happened about 60 years ago), it would not have gained in stature or prestige if Tamil Nadu had not been blessed with a dancer of Bala's calibre exactly in that era.

As one who has had the privilege of witnessing her dance, I was attracted by a slim pamphlet containing Bala's thoughts, views, and reminiscences brought out by the Sruti Foundation, Madras. But the fifteen pages, sensitively edited by S. Guhan, contain enough to read, more than once, and to ponder. For it is not only her experience as a dancer that is reflected here; her dedication to the quintessence of the artistic tradition is what comes through, in ringing tones. An added virtue is her infrangible integrity.

Bala's good fortune was to have been born the granddaughter of Veena Dhanammal, a towering personality in the field of Carnatic music. Though she says of her family, "the traditions of music and dance have been the focus of life for generations", the dominant influence was that of Dhanammal:

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My interpretation of *padas* depends on Dhanammal's interpretation of all her music, not just *padas*. She has set an ideal of richness and subtlety of emotional expression that shines like a lamp, before those who have heard and appreciated her music. Dhanammal would not allow us to sit around; one had to practise all the time... Her unbending maxim was that all bodily comforts had to be sacrificed for the advancement of art.

Bala's mother too was a musician, as also many others in the family, though there was the dim memory of a great-great-grandmother who was a dancer in the court of Travancore. Apart from the strong bias towards music, there was the social climate to contend with, thanks to the active campaign for the abolition of *devdasis*. How,

then, did Bala turn to dance? Bala recalls that it was the great classical musician, Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar, who lent powerful support to her mother in the option. Once her mother 'selected' Kandappa as the guru for Bala, there was no looking back. "Rigorous dance training from him" was embellished with sensitive musical education from her mother: "Jayammal taught the close relationship of *abhinaya* to *raga*".

That early lesson was to stay with her all through life. Speaking at the East-West Conference in Hawaii in 1979, she said:

In demonstrating the art of Bharatanatyam abroad, I have made a special point of showing audiences how delicately linked is the realisation of movement to *raga* expression in *abhinaya*, including the subtle expression of *gamakas*, intonation of *sruti* and the unfolding to improvisation in *niraval*.

Herself an accomplished singer, she would often sing while dancing: "A dancer, proficient in music, is able to completely melt and mould her body in submission to God". One thing she was absolutely clear about—the supremacy of music in Bharatanatyam. Guhan reports her comments: "You think you are being transported by the dance; it is the music that is deceiving you".

The reference to the dancer's body "in submission to god" belongs to her tenet—rooted in the notion of *devadasi*:

Like the other modes of ritual, such as incense, flowers, camphor and sweetmeats, the offering of music and dance has to be made in a spirit of worship, devotion and surrender. There can be no room for error in this... Even for an ordinary being like myself, on some occasions and in some measure, dance and music have enabled a deep experience of the presence of God.

In this process, she was convinced, the Tanjavur style and the traditional order of performance (*alarippu* to *tillana*) were most conducive. Speaking at the Indian Fine Arts Society in 1981, Bala said:

I speak as a dancer of 50 years' standing. If today I have, at my level, achieved tangible self-fulfilment, and if numerous persons belonging to various countries have also found spiritual and aesthetic satisfaction in my dance, it is the Tanjavur style that is responsible.

Naturally, she set her face firmly against 'innovation' in Bharatanatyam. Not only did she frown on the employment of *keertanas* (e.g. Tyagaraja's '*Sadinchane*') for dance, she found a *varnam* like '*Viribhoni*' in Bhairavi unsuitable. She explained why: it is a *tana-varnam*, not a *pada-varnam*. Besides, "the words and ideas come along too fast and furious".

Bala's faith in the tradition that she imbibed was the faith of a devotee. She was as content as she was convinced that "traditional discipline gives the fullest freedom to the individual creativity of the dancer". She is forthright in her disdain for seekers of novelty when she says: "Let those who create novel dance-forms present them as separate performances; they need not make a hash of the Bharatanatyam recital by interpolations of novelties."

If Bala attained the status of a doyenne (dancers had not yet begun calling themselves '*prima ballerina*'), it was on the strength of her *abhinaya*. The richness that she lent to the interpretation of the song '*Jagadodharana*' in Yaman turned an ordinary lyric into a famous composition. The magic of her art is revealed in some of the passages in this pamphlet. First, she distinguishes between *abhinaya* and acting:

The gestures used in Bharatanatyam must never be taken to be the gestures used in everyday life or in drama or in film acting. *Abhinaya* is as far removed from acting as poetry is from prose. No feeling, no emotion, no mood, no experience, no locale is portrayed in a self-conscious manner. They are all expressed in the suggestive language of imagination. [Emphasis added.]

Subtlety was indeed her forte. Watching her perform at the Indian Council for Cultural Relations, Delhi, in the '70s, I recall I was moved to sentimental exilars-

tion when she rendered *abhinaya* for the song 'En palli kondeer aiya'. It is descriptive of Lord Ranganatha of Srirangam who is reclined as *seshashayi*. Interpreting the spirit of the devotional lyric, rather than the words, when Bala ran her eyes across the reclining figure in her mind's eye, deferentially, she demonstrated what she describes as the "divine character" of dance. "Dignified restraint is the hall-mark of *abhinaya*", she says. For "the divine is divine only because of its suggestive, subtle quality". (The dividing line between a dancer and a philosopher can be truly thin.) Yet, as connoisseur, she says:

Sringara stands supreme in the range of emotions; it is the cardinal emotion which gives fullest scope for artistic improvisation, branching off continually as it does into the portrayal of innumerable moods full of newness and nuances.

A thought Kalidasa would endorse!

How did Bala acquire so much, without what we call formal education? Talent ran in her blood, no doubt. But it was significant that she came under the influence of the cultural élite—Ariyakudi, T.K.C., Tiru V. K. V. Raghavan—to name but a few. Few have been able to derive so much from the linkage between *kavya* and *natya*.

Little wonder, therefore, that she had occasion to express resentment over some tendencies which are dominant today, but which had begun to surface in her lifetime. Admonishing parents who seek quick progress and press publicity for their daughters, Bala said: "Let them not, please, hustle teachers to prepare their girls for early *arangetram*". To the critic, she stressed the "responsibility to closely monitor drawbacks and to expose them, so that they can be corrected. I am afraid that these days there is too much praise and too little concern for protecting the quality of the art."

She did not spare the *sabhas* either—

who give opportunities only to those who have money or prestige... For the daughters of the elite, dance is only a hobby. *Sabhas* desire not

only indirect benefit from hosting the daughters of the elite, it has even reached a pass when they expect payment for doing so. Instead of being temples for Saraswati, *Sabhas* have become the play-fields of Dhanalakshmi.

In today's context, when dancers are as culpable as the *sabhas*, all this might evoke cynical laughter. But that would itself explain why Bala remains without a successor.

K.S. SRINIVASAN

The Varnam

Lalita Ramakrishna

Harman Publications, Delhi, 1991

286 pages, Rs. 380

This book is an asset for the student or enthusiast of Carnatic music. To my knowledge, no other book has examined the Varnam with such thoroughness, tracing the entire history of this song-type.

Varnams are the very foundation of Carnatic music as they give an insight into *ragalakshana* and *talalakshana*. If one is able to master a Varnam in a particular *raga*, he can be sure of having acquired full knowledge of the *raga* in all its aspects. For example, the Bhairavi Varnam '*Viribhoni*' gives a complete picture of the *raga* and the rhythmic possibilities it offers.

Unfortunately, in spite of the fact that there are innumerable Varnams composed by masters, only a few are in vogue: of late, practising musicians have simply not taken the pains to enlarge their repertoire. In fact, the Varnam is being used practically for clearing the throat at the start of a performance—a rather sad state of affairs. Fortunately, the *pada-varnams* as against the *tana-varnams* have not been subjected to such cavalier treatment. Our Bharatanatyam dancers have utilized many *pada-varnams* for imaginative interpretation in their recitals.



It must however be noted that this book by itself, with its notations, cannot help students comprehend the full import of the Varnam. Notations can only guide us to some extent in Carnatic music. This is because the seven solfas have different frequencies in different scales. For example, the *rishabham* in Saveri is quite different from the *rishabham* in Todi. Our music solely depends upon *karna-param-parai*—that is to say, only by listening (and learning from a good teacher) can one do justice to a composition. It would thus have been a good idea to prepare an illustrative cassette to accompany the book.

A student of Carnatic music would gain by reading the chapter on 'Etymology, Form and Structure' here as it provides a good deal of information about the Varnam—its origin, the names of the composers, and the *mudras* used by them. The author has also carefully gone into the structure of some Varnams and brought out the contents of the rhythm-oriented *swara* patterns of Varnams, giving an insight into the genius of the composers.

Varnams do not always commence on the *sam*; there are Varnams which start on the

third finger as in the case of the Ada-tala Varnams. The 14 beats of the Ada-tala Varnams are not organized in two equal halves of seven beats each but divided into two segments of five beats each and one of four. The Ada-tala Varnam is called Kanda-jathí Tripura Tala in musical parlance. Many such details are well brought out in this book. Its chapter on the historical review of the Varnam should also be useful for students of Carnatic music.

The author has not been too conservative in her approach to the subject and has been catholic enough to give due importance to present-day composers of Varnams like Lalgudi Jayaraman, T.R. Subramaniam, and Balamurali Krishna. This is as it should be as both Lalgudi Jayaraman and Balamurali Krishna have given a new dimension to Varnams with the *bhava* and lyrical excellence of their compositions. Their Varnams are extremely popular these days with both musicians and dancers.

SUBBUDU

Sitar Technique in Nibaddha Forms

Stephen Slawek

Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1987

232 pages, Rs. 250

This book attempts to provide a basic understanding of improvisation in Hindustani instrumental music, particularly the Sitar. The major part of the book comprises a thesis submitted to the University of Hawaii for a master's degree in Music (Ethnomusicology) in 1978.

Going by the title of the book, one would expect at least a short description of the terms *nibaddha* and *anibaddha* at the outset, but this one doesn't find. On page 2, the author simply says:

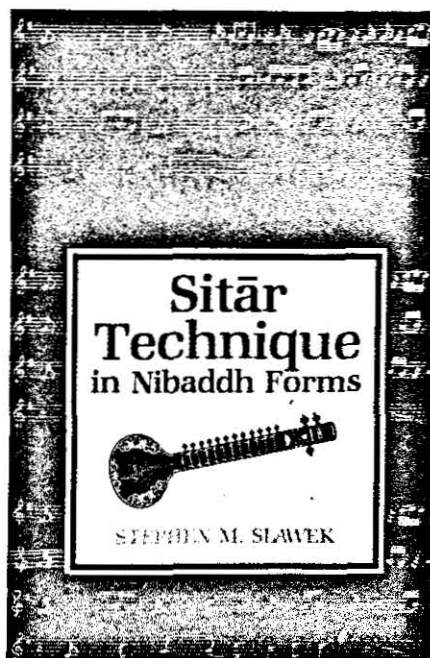
...it is necessary to remember that the present study is limited to the *nibaddha sangeet* (bound

music, set to a rhythmic cycle) of classical style. The improvisatory process of light classical music will not be dealt with, nor will the use of Sitar in non-classical music be examined. He also declares that the role of the *gharana* in defining musical style has not been discussed in the present study.

The book is divided into two sections. The first section consists of an outline of the thesis (its background, research and methodology), a rather brief survey of well-known theories about the origin and development of the Sitar, an account of the possible sources of present-day Sitar technique—including the basic “building blocks” of left- and right-hand technique—and a description of how these techniques are combined to deal with larger musical structures during performance.

The second section provides a short discussion of the variables of musical performance in improvisation, followed by the notation of a performance by Pandit Ravi Shankar and a detailed analysis of the same. Chapter V, which deals with *talim shrinkhala*, can be taken as the link between the two sections of the book. Here the author analyzes in detail the different *gat*-types: *Masitkhani*, *Razakhani*, *vilambit*, *drut*—all set to *Teentala*—as well as *gats* composed in other *talas* and their *vistar*. Against this background the sixth and seventh chapters of the book are developed—the most important ones—providing notation and analysis of *vilambit* and *drut gat-vistar* by Pandit Ravi Shankar. The relevant recording is of *raga Rasiya* (Capital international series, S.P. 10482 LP). This record is the basis of all analyses in the book; the *Tabla* accompaniment is by Kanai Dutt.

Going through the book, one feels that the first section lacks in comprehensiveness, though the topics dealt with here are judiciously chosen. For example Chapter III, dealing with the sources of modern Sitar technique, relies entirely on discussions with Pandits Lalmani Misra and Ravi Shankar. Although the author reaches some intelligent and useful conclusions, one does feel that the chapter should also have taken into



account relevant textual material on this topic. The author only makes a brief reference to the *hastavyapar* of the *Ekatantri Vina*, a term used by Sharangadeva for the repertory of techniques for that instrument. Further, he talks about the contributions of the *Been*, *Rabab*, percussion instruments, and vocal music to current Sitar technique. This topic itself could be the subject of a full-length doctoral thesis and cannot be dealt with in just one chapter.

In Chapter V the author speaks at length about the *talim* for different *gat*-styles and their improvisation. Though he devotes more space (and attention) to the description and analysis of the *Teentala vilambit gat*, he also describes the *drut gat* and *gats* in *talas* other than *Teentala*, which he calls the *kut baz*. This term was originally coined by Pandit Lalmani Misra in his book *Bharatiya Sangeet Vadya*. While it is not uncommon today to play a *vilambit gat* in *Rupak* or *Jhaptal*, it was rather rare even in the early

'70s. Pandit Lalmani Misra used to play such *gats* on the Vichitra Vina. Again, Pandit Ravi Shankar has popularized many other *talas* like Ada Chautal, Dhamar, etc. for *vilambit* and *madhya-laya* compositions. Apart from *vilambit* Jhumra, Jhaptal, Ada Chautal, etc., the author gives the *mizrab* patterns for Pancham Savari and Matta-tala.

Notating Indian music is a very difficult task. As Pandit Ravi Shankar says in his foreword to the book: "Interpreting an oral art tradition through writing can be confusing, unsatisfactory or even misleading in spite of the seriousness and competence of the writer." Slawek—formerly a student of Pandit Lalmani Misra at Banaras Hindu University and since 1978 a student of Pandit Ravi Shankar—passes muster in this respect. (Notation of music exercises and compositions has been common enough since the appearance of Pandit Bhatkhande's *Kramik Pustak Malika*, but notation of full performances for the purpose of analysis is still quite rare.)

The author analyzes *vilambit* and *drut gats* separately, limiting his parameters to structural elements in general form, the context of a precomposed section, technique in variation of a precomposed section, and

the interrelationship of the *shrinkhala* of the *vistar* with tempo, range, and technique. Going through this analysis, one wants to know about the aesthetic aspects involved, but these are not substantially dealt with. Also, the Tabla portions are not commented upon at all. Though the focus of course is on Sitar technique, some attention to Tabla accompaniment would have enriched Slawek's analysis.

The analyses in the book are well supported with clear charts, graphs, and notation. The author has devised a modified version of staff notation to deal with Sitar music. The use of the left and right hands has been indicated between the lines of music.

The book would have been more useful had it attempted a comparative study of the performances of a few select Sitar-players or analyzed three or four performances by Pandit Ravi Shankar alone. The analysis here is solely on the basis of *one* performance by Ravi Shakar. Even so, the book does prepare the ground for more serious analytical works on the Sitar in future.

SUNEERA KASLIWAL